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CHICAGO TRIBUNE
6 FEBRUARY 1983

CIA reportedly can't tie KGB to Pope shooting

By James Coates
Chicago Tribune

WASHINGTON—President Reagan's proposal for a meeting with Soviet leader Yuri Andropov to sign a nuclear missile agreement came last Monday only after CIA officials said they did not have any conclusive proof that the Soviet Union engineered the 1981 shooting of Pope John Paul II, according to U.S. government sources.

During briefings about the Pope's shooting for the White House and Capitol Hill, some CIA officials compared the situation to the confusion over a possible Soviet role in the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the sources said.

The briefers repeatedly emphasized that their conclusions are being drawn primarily from results obtained by an Italian court investigating the shooting of the Pope, rather than from United States agents here and abroad.

Although the Italian investigation has not yet been concluded, a number of U.S. officials have indicated that American intelligence agencies doubt the Italians will produce conclusive proof of any association between Mehmet Ali Agca, the Pope's assailant, and the Soviet secret police.

INFORMED SOURCES with access to some of the briefings said Vice President George Bush discussed the attack on the pontiff with the CIA's Rome station chief and other experts before traveling to Europe last week.

President Reagan's proposal to Andropov came in an open letter which Bush read in West Berlin.

Italy's Defense Minister Lello Lagorio implied in December that the Bulgarian government was involved in the shooting of the Pope. There has been international speculation that the Soviet KGB worked in collusion with Bulgarian authorities in what has been called the plot to kill the Pope.

Sen. Alfonse M. D'Amato (R-N.Y.) said last September that he was "convinced that the Soviet KGB had full knowledge of and at least tactically supported the plot." D'Amato, a conservative, said it was "quite apparent that the Soviets would have liked to rid the Vatican

of the Polish Pope."

Both Bulgaria and the Soviet Union have denied any involvement in the assassination attempt.

If Soviet involvement in the shooting were proved, it could destroy vital East-West economic and political links and disrupt everything from U.S.-Soviet trade to arms control.

Sources said the CIA briefers indicated that a "chain of circumstantial evidence" leads from Agca to the Bulgarian secret police.

The sources noted that Bulgarian officials recently took several steps to defuse speculation that their secret police set up Agca's attack for the KGB.

FOR EXAMPLE, authorities in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia allowed a New York Times reporter to interview Bekir Celenk, a Turk wanted by Italy on complicity in the assassination attempt. Celenk said in the interview that he has never met Agca. Italian newspapers have reported that Celenk offered Agca \$1.25 million to shoot the Pope. The reports are unconfirmed.

Bulgaria placed Celenk "under government control" in Sofia in December after the newspaper reports were published. On Tuesday, a Bulgarian prosecutor said Celenk has been released from detention but has not been allowed to leave the country until the Italian inquiry is completed.

At the same time, Bulgarian authorities deny that their country had any dealings with Celenk.

A SIMILAR suspicion of Soviet involvement occurred in the wake of Kennedy's assassination after it was disclosed that Oswald had gone to the Soviet Union in 1959 and offered to provide the KGB with details he learned as a radar technician at a U-2 spy plane base in Japan.

But, as the CIA briefers have noted in current sessions about the Pope's shooting, there was enough doubt in the Kennedy case to keep the U.S. from ever formally charging that the KGB was involved in the assassination.

The experts emphasize that the current situation involving the Pope contains similar doubt.